

Michael SMALLWOOD ¹

**Fremd bin ich eingezogen, Fremd zieh' ich wieder aus ² :
The Common yet not Shared Crises of Opera Singers**

Abstract

There is almost no empirical research into the later stages of classical singers' careers and the difficulties faced. A quantitative study of operatic soloists was conducted via online questionnaire to ascertain when and how these difficulties manifest themselves. The survey divided the singers into 2 groups: those who stopped their solo careers as a result of the difficulties and those whose careers continued, in order to explore the differences between the responses of the 2 groups to the career downturn. This article posits that the singer's crisis is a common experience, though one which singers seldom discuss amongst themselves. To illustrate this, it focuses on the 2 causes for career difficulties most often cited by the respondents: mental health issues and technical vocal problems. The study demonstrates a reluctance by singers to deal with anxiety, stress and self-doubt, even at the cost of their careers.

Keywords: Opera; professional singers; crisis; career; longevity; mixed-methods; vocal technique

Résumé

Les crises communes mais non-partagées des chanteurs lyriques

Il n'existe pratiquement aucune recherche empirique sur les étapes ultérieures de la carrière des chanteurs classiques et les difficultés rencontrées. Une étude quantitative des solistes d'opéra a été menée via un questionnaire en ligne pour déterminer quand et comment ces difficultés se manifestent. L'enquête a divisé les chanteurs en 2 groupes : ceux qui ont arrêté leur carrière solo en raison des difficultés et ceux dont la carrière s'est poursuivie, afin d'explorer les différences entre les réponses des 2 groupes aux difficultés de carrière. Cet article suggère que la crise du chanteur est une expérience commune, même si les chanteurs en discutent rarement entre eux. Pour illustrer cela, il explore les 2 causes de difficultés de carrière les plus souvent citées par les répondants : les problèmes de santé mentale et les problèmes techniques vocaux. L'étude démontre une réticence des chanteurs à faire face à l'anxiété, au stress et au doute de soi, même au prix de leur carrière.

Keywords: Opéra; chanteurs professionnels; crise; carrière; longévité; méthodes mixtes; technique vocale, chanteurs lyriques

INTRODUCTION

I came here a stranger,
As a stranger, I leave again.

So begins *Die Winterreise*, for many the crowning achievement of Franz Schubert's Liedkunst. Published in the year of his death, his settings of 24 poems by Wilhelm Müller tell the story of a

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² "I came here a stranger, As a stranger I leave again", Song 1, in *Der Winterreise* by Franz Schubert. Trans: the author.

solitary and bereft wanderer, marching towards an uncertain – but certainly not happy – fate. He meets only one other character on his journey: a musician, a cold and derelict hurdy-gurdy player:

No one cares to listen to him
No one looks at him.

Schubert finishes his cycle with this image of the broken musician. Alone. Playing for no one. The wanderer asks the musician to travel with him. However, it seems clear that he will continue his journey alone.

The fate of the wanderer, to say nothing of the Leiermann himself, reflects for some who sing this work the solitude of life as an opera singer,³ leading inevitably to the personal tragedy when one is no longer able to sing, or worse, when no one cares to listen. This is the phase of a career that often arrives unexpectedly, leaving the singer ill-prepared as their “cherished career as [an] elite singer [begins] to peel away”⁴.

In the penultimate chapter of her book *Sängerische Begabung*, the soprano and pedagog Kathrin Graf refers to a classical singer ending his or her solo career as a “taboo topic”, commenting that: “Just as in life, one seldom speaks of death, even though it awaits us all... the topic of how someone ends his singing career is hardly ever spoken about among singers.”⁵ So in the interest of full disclosure I would like to describe my own vocal “near death experience”. In the early 2010s, I was a soloist at the Oper Halle, engaged to sing lead roles as a “Mozart Fach” tenor. The Oper Halle gave me the chance to try out what I regarded as “my repertoire” in a smaller house, more or less below the radar, before hopefully singing the same roles in more important, international theatres. As one such opportunity arose – singing *Don Giovanni* with an international cast in Dijon – my Intendant in Halle said I could accept the contract as long as I also sang my scheduled performances in Halle. This would entail singing performances on six consecutive nights, including recording one show for a DVD, using night trains to travel between France and Germany each night. I did not think twice – the opportunity was too important. And if I am honest, the money was important too.

By the last performance, a Sunday matinee of *Die Fledermaus*, I was a wreck, barely making it through. I had not dared to cancel because of what I saw as my agreement with the Intendant. Would that I had, because thereafter followed a pretty profound burnout. I canceled three months of

³ See, for example, the commentary by tenor Bostridge, Ian. *Schubert's Winter's Journey: Anatomy of an Obsession*. London, Faber & Faber Ltd., 2015, p. 385.

⁴ Connell, Kathleen, Baker, Sarah & Brown, Andrew. The Rise and Fall of Professional Singers. In: *Geographies of Creativity*, edited by A. de Dios and L. Kong, 2020, Singapore: Elgar Press, p. 13.

⁵ Graf, Kathrin. *Sängerische Begabung: Perspektiven auf einen künstlerischen Beruf*. Wiesbaden, Brietkopf & Härtel, 2005, p. 57.

performances. Whilst doctors reported healthy vocal cords, I had many other symptoms: muscle spasms in my neck and throat; jaw and tongue-tension; back pain, which became cranial pain; reduced vocal stamina; insomnia. I had pushed my body to the limit, trying to do in my mid-30s, what may even have been impossible in my mid-20s.

I was lucky that I had a full-time job and a sympathetic boss who allowed me to take time to recover. The recovery involved seeing my teacher three times a week for 20-30 minutes, speech therapy, physiotherapy and Feldenkrais sessions; a process lasting 5-6 months.

I made the decision – an unusual one, as I would discover – to talk with colleagues about my difficulties. Many said they admired my courage in admitting my weakness. Others said they had gone through similar crises, and were relieved to be able to talk about it.

In retrospect, the crisis was probably more chronic than acute; that the acute event in March of 2013 had its roots in technical problems that had surfaced a few years before in mid 30s. I had started the work of technical repair, but had not acknowledged that changes in my vocal stamina combined with psychological stress caused by this new sense of my own “vocal mortality” had made me far more vulnerable to the crisis I experienced.

Jump forward 5 years to a new production of *Die Zauberflöte* in Vienna: I was working with a younger colleague who was demonstrating some of the technical deficiencies and signs of burnout that I had experienced at about the same age. Similarly, his career was booming, and he probably did not think too much about the vocal decline I could hear, even when commented upon in reviews. My agent remarked that he was vocally “disappointing” and “hard to hear” in a very intimate theatre in what should be one of the easiest roles in his repertoire.

But just as no one told me, no one told him, and he would be left to deal with the problem on his own.

This decline is a phenomenon I had come to recognise often in younger colleagues and it is this common but not shared experience of difficulty or crisis in mid-career – Graf’s *Tabuthema* – that is the subject of my research.

My former teacher, the dramatic baritone Gregory Yurisich, always told his graduating students to “beware the crisis in your 40s”; that changes in the instrument or technical problems would lead to career difficulties and if not addressed, to the end of a performing career. The current study posits that Yurisich’s crisis, colleagues’ observed difficulties as well as my own crisis are part of the same phenomenon, different in form but similar in origin, and that for many singers the crisis starts well before the 40th birthday.

As will be detailed later, career difficulties of operatic soloists remain under-researched. For this reason a focus-group tested, online survey was conducted between September and December 2020 to examine the following:

1. How prevalent is the crisis, and can it lead to the end of a performing career as Yurisich suggested?
2. How does it manifest itself and how does it affect professional life?
3. In the singer's opinion, what are its proximate causes?
4. What measures did the singer undertake – if any – to mitigate its effects, and how successful were they?

In addition to describing the problem and its prevalence, the survey separated the responses of those who had survived the crisis from the singers who stopped singing due to it. In this way, the research seeks to provide information about successful mitigation tactics that might be employed by singers.

This paper will focus on the two most frequently cited proximate causes of career difficulties:

1. Problems with vocal technique; and
2. Mental health issues (such as anxiety, stress and self-doubt).

There are of course many other factors cited by respondents, such as competition in the market, financial stress and pressure from family. It will be argued that what links the two former factors is that they are problems over which an individual singer notionally could have some self-determination, as opposed to industry-based problems over which the singer has none.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beyond specific medical issues⁶, very little research has been devoted to the subject of singer's mid-career difficulties⁷ – to say nothing of the decision to end a solo career. Most published research related to singers' careers focuses on three themes:

1. The quality and appropriateness of tertiary training;⁸

⁶ See for example: Phyland, Debra *et al.* Self-Reported Voice Problems among Three Groups of Professional Singers. In: *Journal of Voice*, 1999. Vol.13, No.4, pp. 602-611; Sandgren, Maria. Voice, soma, and psyche: a qualitative and quantitative study of opera singers. In: *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*. 2002, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 11-21; Seidner, Wolfram & Wedler, Jürgen. *Die Sängerstimme: Phoniatische Grundlagen für die Gesangsausbildung: Phoniatische Grundlagen des Gesangs*. Leipzig, Henschel, 1998.

⁷ Simon, Stefan & Wroblewsky, Govinda *Sänger*innen und ihr Übergang vom Studium ins Berufsleben*. Detmold. Netzwerk Musikhochschulen. 2019, p. 9; Connell, Kathleen. Navigating a performance livelihood: career trajectories and transitions for the classical singer, In: *Music Education Research*, 2020, 22:5, pp. 569-580.

⁸ E.g. Bork, Magdalena. *Traumberuf Musiker? Herausforderungen an ein Leben für die Kunst*. Zurich Schott Music, 2010.

2. Negotiating the change from student-life to employment;⁹ and
3. The realities of the work-life of a singer¹⁰.

The most recent German studies are aimed at those starting careers, even if they do address employment prospects of recent graduates¹¹, or alternative career paths.¹² Probably the most oft-cited, and incidentally one of the few quantitative studies to consider the career longevity of musicians is the 2005 study by Gembris & Langner¹³, which examines the areas in which the respondents (659 pianists, instrumentalists, and vocalists from seven German Hochschulen) are musically active and how they earn money.¹⁴ None of these *Absolventenstudien*¹⁵ are specific to singers, nor do they follow the musicians into mid-career.

Graf, who devotes two pages of her book to end of career considerations, refers obliquely to the possibility of a crisis when unable to maintain previous high vocal standards,¹⁶ imagining a naturally occurring transition after a long career, which doesn't speak to the reality that many highly trained singers end their careers much earlier.

The English-speaking literature (with three prominent exceptions, detailed later) is overwhelmingly focused on instrumentalists¹⁷ and rarely deals with end of career issues.¹⁸ An Australian study from 1999 investigates the prevalence of vocal disorders in a group of 171 singers working in various genres, but addresses neither the causes of the disorders, nor their effect on the singer's livelihood.¹⁹

What lies behind this relative lack of research?

⁹ E.g. Kastendeich, Matti *Ergebnisse der Absolventenbefragung 2015 und 2016*. Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg. 2018.

¹⁰ E.g. Uecker, Gerd. *Traumberuf Opernsänger. Von der Ausbildung zum Engagement*, Leipzig. Henschel 2012.

¹¹ Kastendeich follows the employment histories for up to 5 years after graduation but does not differentiate between instrumentalists and vocalists, nor between performers and teachers.

¹² Siebenhaar, Klaus & Müller, Achim. *Opernsänger mit Zukunft! Karriereaussichten für Nachwuchssänger im deutschen Kulturbetrieb - Analysen, Erfahrungen, Empfehlungen*. Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019, p. 110.

¹³ Whilst focusing primarily on difficulties at the start of the career and the qualities and deficits of the training at the German Hochschulen, their study incidentally points to a very high rate of attrition amongst classical musicians, particularly singers, with many ceasing to earn their livelihood from performance already in their 30s. Gembris, Heiner & Langner, Diana. *Von der Musikhochschule auf den Arbeitsmarkt. Erfahrungen von Absolventen, Arbeitsmarktexperten und Hochschullehrern*. Augsburg, Wissner, 2005.

¹⁴ Gembris, H. (2014) *Berufsaussichten und Anforderungen an die Ausbildung. Vortrag zur Zukunftskonferenz Musikhochschulen*, Mannheim, 15.2. 2014, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Studies of University graduates*. Trans: The author.

¹⁶ Graf pp. 57-59.

¹⁷ E.g. Mills, J. & Smith, J. (2006). Working in music: Becoming successful. In H. Gembris (Ed.), *Musical Development from a Lifespan Perspective*. Lang, pp.131-140.

¹⁸ One interesting exception is the 2004 New York Times article by Juilliard clarinetist-turned-journalist Dan Wakin, who interviewed 36 instrumentalists who graduated from Juilliard in 1994. Interestingly he reports that almost one third of respondents had left a career in music behind completely. Sadly, he did not interview any singers. Wakin, Dan. The Juilliard Effect: Ten Years Later. In: *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2004.

¹⁹ Phlyand, D. *et al.*

One reason may be that Culture Ministries and Arts Foundations paying for the research are more interested in the success stories of tertiary institutions, training programs or competitions than in the long-term prospects of individual musicians. These stories tell a more optimistic tale than those dealing with vocal crisis or end of career considerations.

Further, people who have left the industry are notoriously difficult to contact, and non-responder analyses in previous studies have suggested that those who drop out regard themselves as less successful and therefore less likely to respond to researchers.²⁰

But another problem might lie with singers themselves.

In the current study, soloists sometimes referred to an inability to discuss problems with a peer group: that “my colleague is also my competition”. There are more singers than jobs available; someone is always ready to take your place. In this world, you do not want to show vulnerability or weakness. A less than optimal performance may turn up on YouTube, and will be commented on by people who have no idea of exigent circumstances influencing your performance. Discussion of illness or injury can create reluctance to employ you. And the size of the market means that any such problem can be discussed easily far and wide, leading to a self-reinforcing discussion of a singer’s demise.

Compare this to the situation of an injured football player, who has a whole team of doctors, physical therapists and sports psychologists to help him back onto the field. Whose injury is just an injury, and is not met with a chorus of criticisms of his technique or work ethic, or doomsaying that the end of his career is nigh. In this world, singers’ reluctance to discuss their problems is understandable.

Strauss: the Singer’s crisis becomes the crisis for Singers

In his research into the changes in the singers’ market, the Theaterwissenschaftler Sebastian Strauss refers to the historical understanding of the vocal crisis as being reduced: “to an individual, quasi-medical diagnosis of poor choices, vocal technique, repertoire and scheduling.”²¹ He suggests that this outdated concept of the singers’ crisis has been superseded, and should be broadened to include difficulties caused by organisational changes in the industry, due in part to increased competition and financial cutbacks.²² Indeed soloists have recently started to organise themselves online to discuss the deterioration in working conditions, though these fora have often devolved into

²⁰ Gembris, H. (2014) p. 3.

²¹ Strauss, Sebastian. Crisis of the singers’ market? Shifting discourses on opera from vocal health to changes in the organisation of work. – In: *Studies in Musical Theater*, 2020, Vol.14, No. 2, p. 208.

²² Strauss p. 209.

factionalised in-fighting and have not effected much change.²³ They are certainly not a place to discuss individual crises, professional, technical or otherwise.

Strauss recounts the story of Maria Callas, probably the best documented incidence of vocal crisis leading to the end of a career.²⁴ In his retelling, it is suggested that Callas' problems were in part technical/medical, but also exacerbated by a destruction of trust with her networks: that the market – in this case theatre directors – no longer believed she was able to do the job. Instead, her demise came to be seen as a combination of technical issues and bad personal decisions: Onassis, weight-loss, emotional instability. One could be forgiven for dismissing much of the commentary as a form of operatic fan-fiction.

Of course, what is missing from this discussion is the voice of the singer herself. Three qualitative studies have attempted to address this.

The Qualitative Studies: Sandgren, Oakland & Connell

In a mixed-methods study, Maria Sandgren conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 professional opera singers in Sweden, asking them, amongst other things to report on “problems related to their professional work [and] coping strategies.”²⁵ As a psychologist, she was particularly concerned with psychological problems and the singers' tendency to give them a somatic cover story.²⁶ Somatic problems have the advantage of relatively straightforward medical solutions (such as visiting a laryngologist²⁷), and the singers made little attempt to alleviate more chronic issues. Psychological problems were the most frequent, yet none of the singers developed a coping strategy.²⁸ The information from the interviews formed the basis of a questionnaire to be used for a quantitative study of a further 49 singers at various career stages. Again the singers reported a mix of somatic and psychological problems, with singers emphasising treating the somatic.

In her study, ex-chorister Jane Oakland interviewed six choristers, formerly in full-time employment, who were made redundant and explores the participants' experiences of unexpected and premature career transition.²⁹ Mental health problems are again prevalent, and she couches her discussion in terms of the “embodied instrument”³⁰ – the idea that the body is the instrument – and

²³ E.g. <https://artbutfair.org>, *Professional International Opera Singers Only*: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/prooperasingers> (01.02.2021).

²⁴ Strauss p. 208.

²⁵ Sandgren p. 11.

²⁶ Sandgren p. 15.

²⁷ Sandgren p. 13.

²⁸ Sandgren p. 15.

²⁹ Oakland, Jane, MacDonald, Raymond & Flowers, Peter. Re-defining ‘Me’: Exploring Career Transition and the Experience of Loss in the Context of Professional Opera Choristers. In: *Musica Scientia*. 2012, Vol.16 (2): pp. 135-147.

³⁰ Oakland p. 145.

suggests that rather than a comparison with the career arc of other musicians, singers may have more in common with dancers or athletes who understand from the outset that theirs will be a finite time performing at elite levels. Her singers, surprised by the sudden loss of work, had to deal alone with the dual crises of loss of income and loss of the singers' identity.³¹

In a highly relevant qualitative study of solo operatic careers, Kathleen Connell interviewed 13 ex-singers about their career trajectories, identifying five distinct stages: pre-career; breaking in; the peak period; denouement; and new directions.³² Of greatest relevance here is the denouement phase (discourse around which Connell notes is "underexposed"³³) during which the singers transitioned, usually unexpectedly and involuntarily from solo performance to a life after singing. The average age of the singers in this period was 36-39 years, and many suffered from emotional and financial stress. Like Strauss, Connell notes that the singers "overestimated the probable length of their career"³⁴.

All three qualitative studies identify a common experience amongst the singers during Connell's aptly named denouement: that they had to deal with the crisis alone, without help from colleagues, employers, agents or other actors in the industry.

METHODOLOGY

Like Sandgren, Oakland and Connell I had originally planned a qualitative analysis based on long-form interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.³⁵ Preliminary interviews to find potential subjects demonstrated that my concept of the difficulties faced was too narrow. That I had chosen a starting point for this research that hewed too closely to my own experience of technical deficiencies and burnout, and I therefore risked overlooking a large group of potential subjects, all the more so given the lack of academic literature to push me in other directions.

For this reason a mixed methods approach was chosen.³⁶ An online questionnaire was written with the help of two focus groups, one German speaking, the other English speaking. The eight participants were evenly divided by gender and language, came from geographically diverse areas, had different voice types, and three of the women had children.

The eligibility criteria for the survey were established and each respondent attested that:

³¹ "However, unlike the music profession, sport and dance have recognised systems in place to guide individuals through the inevitable transition." Oakland p. 145.

³² Connell, Kathleen, Baker, Sarah & Brown, Andrew. The Rise and Fall of Professional Singers. In: *Geographies of Creativity*, edited by A. DeDios and L. Kong, 2020, Singapore: Elgar Press. p. 2.

³³ Connell p. 10.

³⁴ Connell p. 11.

³⁵ Braun, Victoria & Clark, Virginia. *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London SAGE Publications, 2013.

³⁶ Julia Brannen (2005) Mixing Methods: The Entry of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches into the Research Process. In: *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8:3, pp. 173-184.

1. They have earned at least half of their income for a period of not less than 5 years as a soloist;³⁷ and
2. They had some sort of career or vocal difficulties in their 30s.

The difficulties could be personal (such as vocal or emotional problems) through more industry-related problems (such as lack of performance opportunities, financial insecurity or family pressure).

Having established eligibility, the third question divided the respondents into those who are still full-time soloists (“Singers”) and those who are no longer (“Ex-Singers”). Both groups then took essentially the same survey: questions around training, vocal health or the start of the career were all identical. Most importantly, both groups answered exactly the same questions around career difficulties, the causes and how they responded.

The last section asked Singers which factors they thought were most important to maintaining their employment. The Ex-Singers were asked about the end of their time as a full-time soloist. Was it their decision? Did they know what they would do after singing? Are they still working in a music-related industry? Additionally most questions allowed respondents to write in an answer, if their response was not listed.

In September 2020 the 15 minute survey was published in both English and German,³⁸ initially through a direct mail to professional contacts (singers, coaches, teachers and agents). All participants were encouraged to forward the survey to colleagues (the “snowballing” technique³⁹). At the beginning of November, a second distribution phase placed links to the survey in appropriate online fora⁴⁰ and industry publications, always with the consent of, and mostly with a recommendation from, the forum moderator/editor.⁴¹ Responses were collected until the end of 2020.

RESULTS

Of the 224 respondents who undertook the online questionnaire, 24 failed to meet the eligibility criteria,⁴² leaving a group of 200 (ex)singers who experienced career difficulties in their 30s ($n=200$). This represents 90% of the original sample.

³⁷ A 5 year minimum was chosen as it is arguably reasonable to assume that if you have already worked 5 years, you might expect to be able to continue, and secondly to exclude respondents who have only briefly worked as soloists.

³⁸ English and German are the primary languages of the biggest opera markets, as well as the most common rehearsal languages, according to Operabase (<https://www.operabase.com/statistics>).

³⁹ Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods (5th Edition)*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 415.

⁴⁰ E.g. Opera Talk, Sänger-Kollegen, Teaching Opera (all on Facebook Groups) (01.02.2021).

⁴¹ National Association of Teachers of Singing’ *Journal of Singing*. (US)

Bundesverband Deutscher Gesangspädagogen’s *Vox Humana* (Austria, Germany, Switzerland).

⁴² 22 respondents indicated that their career difficulties occurred in their 40s, whilst two had not worked long enough as a soloist.

53% of the respondents were female. All recognised voice types were represented, with a preponderance of lyric/lighter voices as opposed to more dramatic voices.⁴³ The respondents came from a variety of geographical regions, with the number of respondents living in each region correlating approximately to the number of performances in that region, with the exception of overrepresentation of those in Oceania.⁴⁴

Of the 200 singers, 58 (representing 29% of the sample) stopped working as full-time soloists at this time due to their career difficulties. Of this group 85% were under 43 years of age when they stopped singing after a mean career length of 13 years (Mode = 7 years).

Psychological Problems

Psychological problems were by far the most oft-cited cause for career downturn for both Singers and Ex-Singers. Self-doubt (singing or performance related), stress, anxiety or stage fright were identified by 59.5% of all respondents as causal, with “self-doubt” as the single, most often-cited response (45% of all respondents). Approximately 20% of Singers and Ex-Singers identified “stage fright” as a significant causal factor. However the 34 Ex-Singers in the group emphasised “self-doubt” (28) over a more generalised “anxiety or stress” (19). For the Singers these two factors were weighted evenly.

Technical Problems

Technical issues such as an insufficiently developed or stable technique, or poor vocal hygiene were cited by 83 respondents (41.5%) as a proximate cause of their career difficulties. These issues were the second most oft-cited cause of career problems, though there was noticeable difference between the Singers and Ex-Singers: 45% of Singers cited technical issues. For Ex-Singers the proportion was just under 30%.

DISCUSSION

It should first be noted that mental health problems were found to be prevalent amongst Singers and Ex-Singers in the studies by Sandgren, Oakland and Connell. Sandgren in particular reported that: “opera singers over the whole career- and age-span reported emotional states of anxiety and depressiveness.”⁴⁵ As she also found, there was a tendency not to seek help for psychological issues.

⁴³ The careers of the heavier and lower voice types typically start later, with the effect that their career difficulties occur later.

⁴⁴ The author’s birthplace. Although the author has seldom worked there he still has access to the singers’ network from his time as a student there.

⁴⁵ Sandgren p. 59.

In the current study, it was found that only 37% of those citing mental health issues as a principal cause for their career problems sought the help of a therapist or counsellor. Many more sought to deal with these issues on their own with a mix of self-help and self-medication.

Compare this situation with those who cited technical problems as a proximate cause of career difficulties: of 83 singers who cited technical problems, only five did not seek professional help, either by increasing the number of lessons with their current teacher or seeking a new one. The solution to both problems could appear similar: time spent regularly with a trained professional, a teacher or a counsellor. The financial outlay would be similar; indeed health insurance might even pay for counselling.

Sandgren found that singers often sought somatic excuses for psychological problems. In this way, a laryngologist could decide if a singer were able to sing that night, thus alleviating some of the psychological burden of performance anxiety. Singing teachers possibly fit into this category, sharing some of the singers' emotional burden. In any event, the reluctance of singers to address psychological problems is an area that needs more research.

CONCLUSIONS

When I commenced this research, I hypothesised that the most important cause of career difficulties were technical vocal problems, and that the solution would be more technical work with the right teacher. Singers who decided to do it alone, did so at their own risk. The current study has shown that the problem is much more complicated, and that issues around mental health are considered by singers to be a more important factor. Despite this, singers are reluctant to seek help, with the majority preferring to try to help themselves.

At a recent Masterclass I was asked by a student about challenges that I had faced, and I chose to share the story of my burnout. The Professor running the class was very critical, saying that she wanted to "protect her students" from negative information. To let them dream a little longer, I suppose. I would contend that as music educators we also have a duty to be realistic with younger musicians. Then maybe the crisis, if and when it comes, will not be so potentially devastating, and the singer in crisis will not feel quite so alone.

I hope through this research to develop a better understanding of this very difficult period in the professional development of many singers. Why do so many professional singers experience these crises, and what strategies can we use to deal with them? At the very least, this should provide valuable information for performers and teachers alike, even if the attrition rate amongst professional singers

remains so high.⁴⁶ Perhaps most of all I would like to start a conversation. In the words of Kathrin Graf: “It would make sense if singers could talk about this shame-laden topic. Only through exchanges about our experiences can we see our problems in a bigger context.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ 30% in this study and this is probably an undercount.

⁴⁷ Graf p. 59.

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